An Important and Little-Known Fact About the Temple of Jerusalem (Gentiles and the Jewish Temple) – Jimmy Akin

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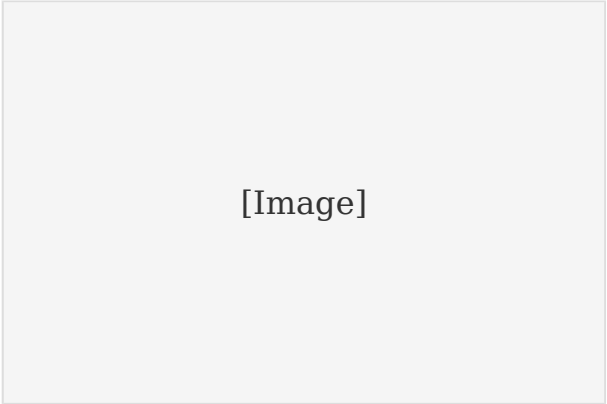

Many people have the idea that, in biblical times, the Jerusalem temple was exclusively for Jewish use.

This is a natural assumption, given the hostilities that led to the Jewish War of the A.D. 60s, as well as the attitude of some Jewish Christians who thought salvation was impossible for Gentiles.

But the historical evidence shows otherwise.

This is a subject I've written about before, but here are some interesting examples that further illustrate the actual situation . . .

The Emperor Augustus

The first century Jewish sage Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 B.C. – c. A.D. 50) was caught up in a controversy involving the Roman emperor Caligula (*aka* Gaius, reigned A.D. 36-41).

This incident occurred after Caligula fell ill in early in his reign and recovered, but with a drastic personality change.

He became very cruel, started demanding to be worshipped as a god, and announced that a statue of himself (depicted as Zeus) would be placed in the Jerusalem temple for Jews to worship.

Philo wrote an account of this controversy in his work *On the Embassy to Gaius*.

During the course of the work, he compared Caligula's treatment of Jews to that of previous Roman individuals, including their treatment of the temple.

He thus reported on how the emperor Augustus (reigned 27 B.C-A.D. 14) and his family supported the Jerusalem temple:

So religiously did [Augustus] respect our interests that, supported by wellnigh his whole household, **he adorned our temple through the costliness of his dedications, and ordered that for all time continuous sacrifices of whole burnt offerings should be carried out every day at his own expense** as a tribute to the most high God.

And these sacrifices are maintained to the present day and will be maintained for ever to tell the story of a character truly imperial (*On the Embassy to Gaius* 23[157]).

Here Philo reports that Augustus:

- Adorned the temple with costly decorations
- He was supported in this by "wellnigh his whole household" (i.e., family)—meaning others did the same (see below)
- He arranged that sacrifices of "whole burnt offerings" would be offered to the Jewish God every day by the Jewish priests
- That he paid for this out of his own pocket
- That these sacrifices were still being offered, with no planned ending date for them

Temple Access for Gentiles

Philo later refers to the fact that portions of the Jerusalem Temple complex were open for Gentiles worshippers:

Still more abounding and peculiar is the zeal of [all the Jewish people] for the temple, and the strongest proof of this is that death without appeal is the sentence against those of other races who penetrate into its inner confines.

For the outer are open to everyone wherever they come from (31[212]).

This refers to the fact that the temple was built as a series of zones that different classes of people could access:

- The outermost area (the Court of the Gentiles) was open to everyone
- The next area (the Court of Women) was open to Jewish men and women
- The next area (the Court of Israel) was open to Jewish men
- The next area (the Court of Priests) was open to Jewish priests
- The final area (the Holy of Holies) was open to the Jewish high priest once a year

These zones were places where the designated people went *to worship*—so the Court of the Gentiles was where Gentiles could go to worship God.

This is why Isaiah refers to the temple as "a house of prayer for all nations" (Is. 56:7).

And it is apparently the area from which Jesus drove out the money changers: They were taking up space that was *reserved* for Gentile worshippers (see Mark 11:17).

Sacrifices on Behalf of Caligula

Sacrifices were offered on behalf of Gentiles at the temple.

In fact, it was normal to offer sacrifices on behalf of Gentile rulers, including Roman emperors.

This had already been done on behalf of Augustus and Tiberius, and Philo refers to the fact that, as soon as Caligula's reign began, the Jewish priests offered sacrifices to God on his behalf:

Was our temple **the first to accept sacrifices in behalf of Gaius's reign** only that it should be the first or even the only one to be robbed of its ancestral tradition of worship? (32[232]).

These sacrifices were to ask God to bless the new ruler and to ask him to help the ruler govern wisely and justly. As St. Paul says:

For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those

who resist will incur judgment (Rom. 13:1-2; see 1 Pet. 3:13-14).

Philo refers to this matter again later, when he recounts how—in a meeting with Caligula—an anti-Jewish man named Isidorus accused the Jewish people of refusing to offer sacrifices on Caligula's behalf.

Philo reports that they defended themselves by saying:

We cried out with one accord, "Lord Gaius, we are slandered; **we did sacrifice and sacrifice hecatombs [large sacrifices of multiple bulls] too**, and we did not just pour the blood upon the altar and then take the flesh home to feast and regale ourselves with it as some do, but we gave the victims to the sacred fire to be entirely consumed, and we have done this not once but thrice already, **the first time at your accession to the sovereignty, the second when you escaped the severe sickness which all the habitable world suffered with you, the third as a prayer of hope for victory in Germany**" (45[356]).

He thus indicates that large sacrifices of bulls were made on Caligula's behalf three times:

1. When he began to reign
2. When he had his severe illness (that drove him crazy)
3. When he was in a conflict with the German tribes

Marcus Agrippa and the Temple

Philo also quotes from a lengthy letter that King Herod Agrippa I sent to Caligula during the crisis regarding his statue.

(This Herod is the one who put St. James son of Zebedee to death in Acts 12. He was also the grandson of Herod the Great and a friend of the emperors Caligula and Claudius. He's the Herod who appears in the BBC drama *I, Claudius*.)

In the letter, Herod refers to how Caligula's own grandfather—Marcus Agrippa—honored the temple when he was in Jerusalem. He reports that he was very impressed by the temple and its priesthood (37[294-296]) and that he made gifts to the temple:

After decking the temple with all the dedicatory gifts which the law made permissible and benefiting the inhabitants by granting every favor which he could without causing mischief and paying many compliments to Herod and receiving a host of the same from him, he was escorted to the harbors not by one city only but

by the whole population of the country amid showers of posies which expressed their admiration of his piety (37[297]).

More on Augustus's Gifts to the Temple

In his letter, Herod Agrippa also gives more detail on the gifts that Augustus supplied to the temple:

Another example no less cogent than this shows very clearly the will of Augustus.

He gave orders for a continuation of whole burnt offerings every day to the Most High God to be charged to his own purse.

These are carried out to this day. Two lambs and a bull are the victims with which he added luster to the altar, knowing well that there is no image there openly or secretly set up.

Indeed this great ruler, this philosopher second to none, reasoned in his mind that within the precincts of earth there must needs be a special place assigned as sacred to the invisible God which would contain no visible image, a place to give us participation in good hopes and enjoyment of perfect blessings (40[317-318]).

Livia's Gifts

Finally, Herod Agrippa notes that Augustus's wife—Julia Augusta (commonly referred to as Livia; she's also the Livia in *I, Claudius*)—made costly gifts to the temple:

Under such an instructor in piety your great-grandmother Julia Augusta **adorned the temple with golden vials and libation bowls and a multitude of other sumptuous offerings** (40[319]).

These golden vials and libation bowls were liturgical furnishings that would have been used in the temple ceremonies.

Conclusion

There certainly was an undercurrent of hostilities on the part of many Jews regarding their Roman overlords, but the idea that the Jerusalem temple was exclusively for Jewish use is not true.

From the beginning, it had been meant as a house of prayer for all nations, with its outermost (and largest) court reserved for Gentile worshippers.

Many of the Gentile worshippers were polytheists, but they did not deny the existence of the Jewish God or refuse to give him worship.

In fact, they made costly gifts to the temple—both in terms of decorations, liturgical furnishings, and underwriting of the costs of the daily sacrifices.

The Jewish priests not only accepted these offerings—recognizing them as permitted by the Jewish Law—they also made special offerings on behalf of the rulers, asking God to bless them with things like health and victory.

The situation may have been tense, and there certainly was Jewish resentment of the Romans, but overall the situation was more cordial than we commonly suppose.

Ultimately, those who were hostile to the Romans got the upper hand and stopped these sacrifices—and that was one of the incidents that led to the Jewish War and the destruction of the temple.

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